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Film over Fibre a Global First at Reliance Adlabs

Vineeta Shetty | Mumbai | 06 Oct 2008



Don't be surprised if your company's next AGM is staged at the local cinema palace. Fibre to the premises is equipping leading cinema theatre chains like Adlabs to become the venue for two-way videoconferencing and gaming in their quest for revenue-enhancing opportunities.

Reliance Communications (RCom)'s nationwide fibre based Metro Ethernet has enabled sister

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concern Adlabs to become the first exhibitor in the world to transmit feature-length digital films directly to theatres on a commercial basis every week. As multiplexes proliferate and compete for audience footfalls, this same capacity is being tested for streaming business and personal entertainment content during slack weekday hours.

In July of this year, the screening of “Mission Istanbul” in Adlabs Ahmedabad marked the debut of “store and forward” cinema in the country and this week, Adlabs clocks up the 2,200th screening at the RWorld Gandhingar with “Hello.”

Fibre-distributed cinema is not new, having premiered in the year 2000 by Qwest, Cisco and 20th Century Fox in the US and again in 2005 for a handful of films by NTT West, Warner Brothers, Paramount and Sony Pictures in Japan. But neither of these agreements resulted in any permanent networked distribution for digital cinema.

Bollywood, with its heaving mass popularity across the length and breadth of India is a core candidate for same-day networked distribution of film files. And Adlabs has found a willing champion in RCom’s Broadband Division, which is seeking to optimise the capillarity of its IP-over-multicast capabilities.

The first step to digital transmission is to make the screens digital-ready. Towards this end, Adlabs Cinema converted more than ten percent of its 185 screens in north and western India this year to Hollywood-grade cinema and is distributing to the majority of these sites via optical fibre. The plan is to gradually migrate all 78 theatres to fibre-based distribution from the current physical medium.

Typically, the average size of a digital cinema package (in film parlance, a Hollywood-quality digitally-encoded feature film) is 100 to 170 Gbps. These are distributed on hard disk drives (HDDs), sent by courier to theatres around the country. This carries its share of risks as the containers could get lost, intercepted, damaged or stolen along the way. While the file is heavily encrypted, a 500 GB drive is worth a significant amount in its own right.

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“Fibre optic transmission of digital cinema benefits all stakeholders in the value chain: cinemas, distributors, producers and service providers,” is the view of Patrick von Sychowski, chief operating officer of Adlabs Digital Cinema, which is an independent service provider of digitised cinema to film producers and distributors. “Delivery takes six to eight hours over a 100 Mbps connection in multi-cast mode. That is much faster than door-to-door for a hard disk drive.”

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There is also little chance of a film not reaching the theatre in time because a flight was cancelled or heavy rain interfered with the satellite download of the film. Though in the early stages of the commercial pilot, HDDs were sent as back-up, Adlabs reports zero failure in the film arriving intact. "Only if a road is dug up and the optic cable damaged, would you not have the film arrive in time at the multiplex," he says.

"Reliance has laid over 80,000 kms of 48 core fibre in India which means the hard work has already been done for us and we simply have to connect the last mile (usually meters) from the switch or the street to the multiplex," says Sychowski. Remote areas like Kashmir and Assam have less coverage, he says, but there are also fewer cinemas there.

One of the big lessons from this year's experience is that sending large fibre packets from point A to point B via fibre optic is relatively easy, but enabling each link for multicasting is much more problematic, says Oswald Soans, network operations manager for Adlabs Films, necessitating configuration of the routers as well as application and network management software.

Adlabs' appetite for bandwidth is enormous and RCom, which was doling out 10 to 20 Mbps to the average business customer, was challenged to quickly provision up to 100 Mbps. In the next phase, Soans wants the operator to scale up to 1 Gbps.

The virtues of vertical integration notwithstanding, Adlabs still had to bargain and negotiate for a favourable commercial arrangement. Reliance charges a one-time fee to connect up each cinema site and Adlabs Digital Cinema then pays a monthly lease on the line, the cost of which it recovers in the form of a premium transport charge from film distributors and savings on airway bills by not having to insure, secure, send out and then retrieve the HDDs.

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To digitise a film, Adlabs Digital Cinema receives post-production files from various facilities across Mumbai (Prime Focus, EFX, Pixion, etc.) at its Mastering HQ in Film City in Goregaon. There, they are converted into a digital cinema package that meets interoperability and security standards specified by the Hollywood studios. The finished product is then “Qced” (quality controlled) on a big screen, before being cloned onto HDDs and sent via a 200Mbps connection

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from Film City to the Reliance Dhirubhai Ambani Knowledge Centre in Navi Mumbai and from there on to the theatres over 100 Mbps lines.

As an independent service provider owned by Adlabs, Adlabs Digital Cinema serves all the cinema chains, including PVR, Satyam, Inox and Fun, as well as smaller and single-owned theatres. “At the moment we have only done this for Adlabs cinemas but in the future we expect to extend this to other cinema chains that we supply films to,” says Sychowski, “all 500 plus screens. It just makes tremendous sense to distribute films over fibre, at least for India. Our next phase will be to look at international distribution over RCom’s FLAG network to places like Singapore, London and New York.”

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